OPINION

Trouble at the border is fueling human trafficking

By Anne Basham
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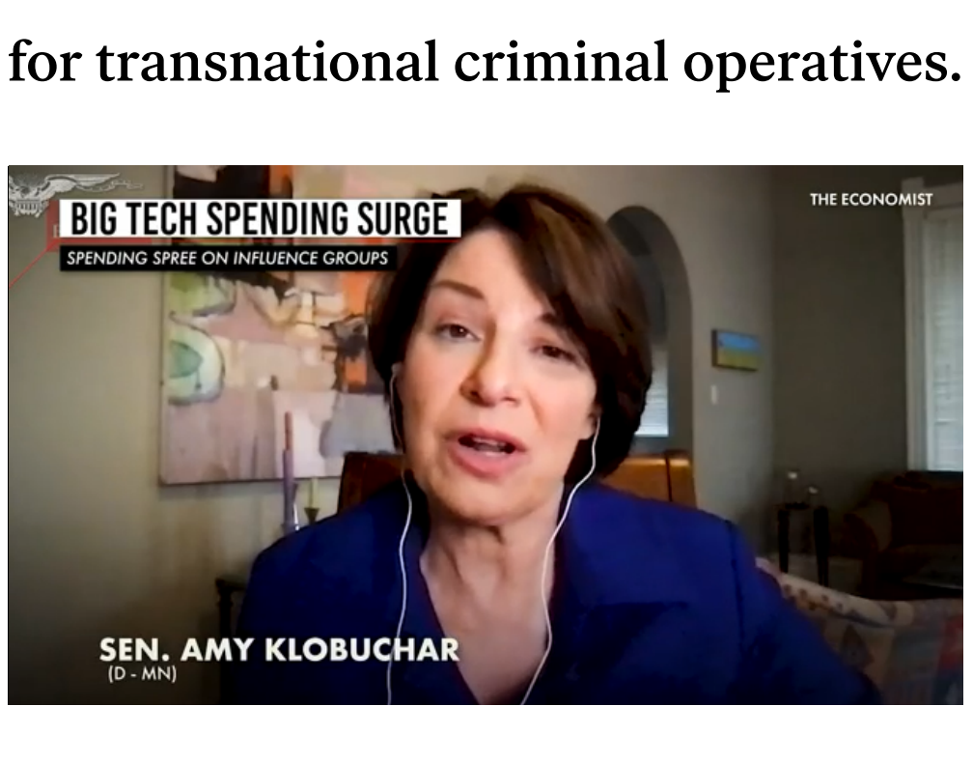
The migration crisis at the U.S. southern border runs deeper than even the most disturbing news reports reveal. The grave humanitarian crisis does not stop at the border. It extends to communities across the nation, as failed immigration policies fuel human trafficking activity.

The world's more than 280 million migrants are among the individuals most vulnerable to the ravages of human trafficking. Those forced to leave their homes, a record 80 million in 2020, are at particular risk, which makes the crush of undocumented migrants surging across the southern border especially concerning. Among them are tens of thousands of children, prime targets for transnational criminal operatives.



According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection data, record numbers of unaccompanied minors have crossed the U.S.-Mexico border illegally in 2021. In August alone, some 18,847 children arrived. Many traveled not with parents or family members, but with human smugglers. The illicit smuggling industry is booming thanks to social media and relaxed border enforcement.

For minors, the real peril begins after entering the United States. One expert estimates 60% of the Latin American children sent across the border alone or with smugglers have been taken by the cartels. What frequently follows is horrific abuse in the form of child pornography or drug trafficking. Most instances of trafficking occur *after* a migrant has been relocated, when promises of a better life are shattered and many are sold as sex workers or slave laborers. The problem exists not in border towns alone. It has spread deep within the U.S. — in big cities, suburban neighborhoods, and rural communities.

Current U.S. immigration policy puts pressure on Border Patrol agents to release migrants within 72 hours of coming into the U.S. That means little vetting is taking place, and current measures to protect minors are insufficient. With scores of young people traveling without parents, many are released to unsavory circumstances. Once children leave their country of origin, they are at the mercy of their custodial guardian. Unfortunately, this is often a trafficker.

Almost no group is more vulnerable to bad actors than recently arrived migrants and refugees. Typically, they arrive in the U.S. without employment, with no English-language skills, and with limited to no understanding of basic American culture. Traffickers exploit these weaknesses to recruit victims for use in the sex trade. As an example, Homeland Security Investigations has prosecuted cases involving girls as young as 14 who were part of a "human pipeline" from Mexico to New York City.

COVID-19 hasn't helped matters. The State Department reports that the number of individuals at risk of trafficking grew significantly during the pandemic. Traffickers have capitalized on the reduced capacity of law enforcement during the COVID outbreak to feed a growing worldwide demand for child pornography. Regrettably, online commercial sex exploitation of children at the hands of human traffickers is a burgeoning global market.

It is not a problem without solutions, however. First and foremost, the U.S. must secure and maintain its borders. Traffickers delight in and depend upon open and chaotic national borders to exploit migrants. The migrant is not the "bad guy" in this scenario. Rather, migrants are potential victims — unwilling tools of the cartels and traffickers who enrich themselves at the expense of the vulnerable, as well as the American citizenry. We must stop fueling the trafficking tragedy and safeguard the border.

Second, we all have a role to play in identifying and combating human trafficking and the exploitation of migrants. It starts with recognizing the threat in our own communities. Trafficking is the fastest-growing criminal enterprise in the world, with 14.5 million victims. It behooves us to educate our children, educators, law enforcement personnel, healthcare workers, and faith communities to recognize the signs of exploitation and grooming of minors in our midst.

Anne Basham is the CEO of Anti-Trafficking International and serves as the chairwoman of the Human Trafficking Task Force for the Parliamentary Intelligence-Security Forum.

Take the Poll: Do you think the US needs a border wall to enforce immigration law?

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